

...that the Eritrean government, one of the most repressive governments in the world where a recent coup attempt just failed, has placed Eritrean Orthodox Church Patriarch Abune Antonios under house arrest since January 2006?

Eritrea has been called the North Korea of Africa for, among other reasons, torturing and imprisoning thousands and committing systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. On January 13, 2006, the Eritrea government placed Patriarch Antonios under house arrest, and on January 20, 2006, stripped him of his executive authority over the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Although Patriarch Antonios was permitted to officiate church services, the government removed his administrative role over church affairs. One year later, on May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government appointed a new Patriarch and forcibly moved Patriarch Antonios to an undisclosed house where he continues to be detained. Patriarch Antonios, who suffers from severe diabetes has been denied medical assistance, is reported to be in deteriorating health.

Prior to his arrest, Patriarch Antonios strongly criticized the Eritrean government's interference in the Church's internal affairs, secret arrest of three Orthodox priests, and detention of political prisoners. He also refused to implement a government order to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who opposed the government of President Isaias Afewerki.

Since 2004, USCIRF has recommended – and the State Department has designated – Eritrea as a “country of particular concern” (CPC), for its “systematic, ongoing and egregious” religious

freedom abuses. An estimated 2,000-3,000 people have been imprisoned for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs over the past decade. Individuals imprisoned for religious reasons often are beaten, tortured, and pressed to renounce their faith. Those who were released reported having been confined in 20-foot metal shipping containers in the desert or in underground barracks, and have suffered the medical consequences of extreme temperature fluctuations.

The Ethiopian government recognizes only four religious communities – the (Coptic) Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Sunni Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination. The government has refused to recognize other religious communities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, and deems "illegal" their basic activities. The government has closed their places of worship, raided their worship services, and banned their activities. Mass detentions of people engaging in such activities now routinely occur. The government also routinely interferes in the internal affairs of registered religious groups, and imprisons Muslims and Orthodox Christians for protesting government interference in their internal affairs.